

THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Prisons, whether state-run or private, are a huge growth industry worldwide, earning millions for their owners while exploiting prisoners for their cheap labour.

by Eve Goldberg
and Linda Evans © 1998/99

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Over 1.8 million people are currently behind bars in the United States. This represents the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the history of the world. In 1995 alone, 150 new US prisons were built and filled. This monumental commitment to lock up a sizeable percentage of the population is an integral part of the globalisation of capital. Several strands converged at the end of the Cold War, changing relations between labour and capital on an international scale: domestic economic decline, racism, the US role as policeman of the world, and growth of the international drug economy in creating a booming prison industrial complex. And the prison industrial complex is rapidly becoming an essential component of the US economy.

PRISONS ARE BIG BUSINESS

Like the military industrial complex, the prison industrial complex is an interweaving of private business and government interests. Its twofold purpose is profit and social control. Its public rationale is the fight against crime. Not so long ago, communism was "the enemy" and communists were demonised as a way of justifying gargantuan military expenditures. Now, fear of crime and the demonisation of criminals serve a similar ideological purpose: to justify the use of tax dollars for the repression and incarceration of a growing percentage of our population. The omnipresent media blitz about serial killers, missing children and "random violence" feeds our fear.

In reality, however, most of the "criminals" we lock up are poor people who commit non-violent crimes out of economic need. Violence occurs in less than 14 per cent of all reported crime, and injuries occur in just 3 per cent. In California, the top three charges for those entering prison are: possession of a controlled substance; possession of a controlled substance for sale; and robbery. Violent crimes like murder, rape, manslaughter and kidnapping don't even make the top ten. Like fear of communism during the Cold War, fear of crime is a great selling tool for a dubious product.

As with the building and maintenance of weapons and armies, the building and maintenance of prisons are big business. Investment houses, construction companies, architects and support services, such as food, medical, transportation and furniture, all stand to profit by prison expansion. A burgeoning "speciality item" industry sells fencing, handcuffs, drug detectors, protective vests and other security devices to prisons.

As the Cold War winds down and the Crime War heats up, defence industry giants like Westinghouse are re-tooling and lobbying Washington for their share of the domestic law-enforcement market. "Night Enforcer" goggles used in the Gulf War, electronic "Hot Wire" fencing ("so hot, NATO chose it for high-risk installations"), and other equipment once used by the military are now being marketed to the criminal justice system. Communication companies like AT&T, Sprint and MCI are getting into the act as well, gouging prisoners with exorbitant phone-calling rates often six times the normal long-distance charge. Smaller firms like Correctional Communications Corp., dedicated solely to the prison phone business, provide computerised prison phone systems fully equipped for systematic surveillance. They win government contracts by offering to "kick back" some of the profits to the government agency awarding the contract. These companies are reaping huge profits at the expense of prisoners and their families; and prisoners are often effectively cut off from communication due to the excessive cost of phone calls.

One of the fastest growing sectors of the prison industrial complex is private corrections companies. Investment firm Smith Barney is a part-owner of a prison in Florida. American Express and General Electric have invested in private prison construction in

Oklahoma and Tennessee. Correctional Corporation of America, one of the largest private prison owners, already operates internationally, with more than 48 facilities in 11 states, Puerto Rico, the United Kingdom and Australia. Under contract by government to run prisons and paid a fixed sum per prisoner, these firms operate, as the profit motive mandates, as cheaply and efficiently as possible. This means lower wages for staff, no unions and fewer services for prisoners. Private contracts also mean less public scrutiny. Prison owners are raking in billions by cutting corners, which harms prisoners. Substandard diets, extreme overcrowding and abuses by poorly trained personnel have all been documented and can be expected in these institutions which are unabashedly about making money.

Prisons are also a leading rural growth industry. With traditional agriculture being pushed aside by agribusiness, many rural American communities are facing hard times. Economically depressed areas are falling over each other to secure a prison facility of their own. Prisons are seen as a source of jobs in construction and for local vendors and prison staff, as well as a source of tax revenues. An average prison has a staff of several hundred employees and an annual payroll of several million dollars.

Like any industry, the prison economy needs raw materials. In this case, the raw materials are prisoners. The prison industrial complex can grow only if more and more people are incarcerated, even if crime rates drop. "Three strikes" and mandatory minimums (harsh, fixed sentences without parole) are two examples of the legal superstructure quickly being put in place to guarantee that the prison population will grow and grow and grow.

LABOUR AND THE FLIGHT OF CAPITAL

The growth of the prison industrial complex is inextricably tied to the fortunes of labour. Ever since the onset of the Reagan/Bush years in 1980, workers in the United States have been under siege. Aggressive union-busting, corporate deregulation, and especially the flight of capital in search of cheaper labour markets have been crucial factors in the downward plight of American workers.

One wave of capital flight occurred in the 1970s. Manufacturing industries such as textiles in the northeast moved south to South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama—non-union states where wages were low. During the 1980s, many more industries (steel, auto, etc.) closed up shop, moving on to the "more competitive atmospheres" of Mexico, Brazil or Taiwan, where wages were a mere fraction of those in the United States and environmental, health and safety standards were much lower. Most seriously hurt by these plant closures and layoffs were African-Americans and semi-skilled workers in urban centres who lost their decent-paying industrial jobs.

Into the gaping economic hole left by the exodus of jobs from US cities has rushed another economy: the drug economy.

THE WAR ON DRUGS

The "War on Drugs", launched by President Reagan in the mid-1980s, has been fought on interlocking international and domestic fronts. At the international level, the war on drugs has been both a cynical cover-up of US Government involvement in the drug trade, as well as justification for US military intervention and control in the Third World.

Over the last 50 years, the primary goal of US foreign policy (and the military industrial complex) has been to fight communism and protect corporate interests. To this end, the US Government has, with regularity, formed strategic alliances with drug dealers throughout the world.

At the conclusion of World War II, the OSS (precursor to the CIA) allied itself with heroin traders on the docks of Marseilles in an effort to wrest power away from communist dock workers.

During the Vietnam War, the CIA aided the heroin-producing Hmong tribesmen in the Golden Triangle area. In return for cooperation with the US Government's war against the Vietcong and other national liberation forces, the CIA flew local heroin out of South East Asia and into America. It's no accident that heroin addiction in the US rose exponentially in the 1960s.

Nor is it an accident that cocaine began to proliferate in the United States during the 1980s. Central America is the strategic halfway point for air travel between Colombia and the United States. The Contra war against Sandinista Nicaragua as well as the war against the national liberation forces in El Salvador were largely about control of this critical area. When Congress cut off support for the Contras, Oliver North and friends found other ways to fund the Contra re-supply operations—in part, through drug dealing. Planes loaded with arms for the Contras took off from the southern United States, offloaded their weapons on private landing strips in Honduras, then loaded up with cocaine for the return trip.

A 1996 exposé by the San Jose *Mercury News* documented CIA involvement in a Nicaraguan drug ring which poured thousands of kilos of cocaine into Los Angeles African-American neighbourhoods in the 1980s. Drug boss Danilo Blandon, now an informant for the DEA, acknowledged under oath the drugs-for-weapons deals with the CIA-sponsored Contras.

US military presence in Central and Latin America has not stopped drug trafficking, but it has influenced aspects of the drug trade and is a powerful force of social control in the region. US military intervention, whether in propping up dictators or squashing peasant uprisings, now operates under cover of the righteous war against drugs and "narco-terrorism".

In Mexico, for example, US military aid supposedly earmarked for the drug war is being used to arm Mexican troops in the southern part of the country. However, the drug trade (production, transfer and distribution points) is all in the north. The "Drug

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War money" is being used primarily to fight against the Zapatista rebels in the southern state of Chiapas, who are demanding land reform and economic policy changes which are diametrically opposed to the transnational corporate agenda.

In the Colombian jungles of Cartagena de Chaira, coca has become the only viable commercial crop. In 1996, 30,000 farmers blocked roads and airstrips to prevent crop-spraying from aircraft. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), one of the oldest guerrilla organisations in Latin America, held 60 government soldiers hostage for nine months, demanding that the military leave the jungle, that social services be increased and that alternative crops be made available to farmers. And given the notorious involvement of Colombia's highest officials with the powerful drug cartels, it is not surprising that most US "Drug War" military aid actually goes to fighting the guerrillas.

One result of the international war on drugs has been the internationalisation of the US prison population. For the most part, it is the low-level "mules" carrying drugs into the United States who are captured and incarcerated in ever-increasing numbers. At least 25 per cent of inmates in the federal prison system today will be subject to deportation when their sentences are completed.

In the US, the War on Drugs has been a war on poor people—particularly poor, urban, African-American men and women. It is well documented that police enforcement of the new, harsh drug laws have been focused on low-level dealers in communities of colour. Arrests of African-Americans have been about five times higher than arrests of whites, although whites and African-Americans use drugs at about the same rate. And, African-Americans have been imprisoned in numbers even more disproportionate than their relative arrest rates. It is estimated that in 1994, on any given day, one out of every 128 US adults was incarcerated while one out of every 17 African-American adult males was incarcerated.

The differential in sentencing for powder and crack cocaine is one glaring example of institutionalised racism. About 90 per cent of crack arrests are of African-Americans, while 75 per cent of powder cocaine arrests are of whites. Under federal law, it takes only five grams of crack cocaine to trigger a five-year mandatory minimum sentence; but it takes 500 grams of powder cocaine—100 times as much—to trigger this same sentence. This flagrant injustice was highlighted by a 1996 nationwide federal prison rebellion when Congress refused to enact changes in sentencing laws that would equalise penalties.

Statistics show that police repression and mass incarceration are not curbing the drug trade. Dealers are forced to move, turf is reshuffled, already vulnerable families are broken up. But the demand for drugs still exists, as do huge profits for high-level dealers in this fifty-billion-dollar international industry.

From one point of view, the War on Drugs can actually be seen as a pre-emptive strike: the state's repressive apparatus working overtime, putting poor people away before they get angry; incarcerating those at the bottom—the helpless, the hopeless—before they demand change. What drugs don't damage (in terms of intact communities, the ability to take action, to organise), the War on Drugs and mass imprisonment will surely destroy. The crack-down on drugs has not stopped drug use. But it has taken thousands of unemployed (and potentially angry and rebellious) young men and women off the streets. And it has created a mushrooming prison population.

PRISON LABOUR: A POT OF GOLD

An American worker, who once upon a time made \$8 per hour, loses his job when the company relocates to Thailand where workers are paid only \$2 per day. Unemployed and alienated from a society indifferent to his needs, he becomes involved in the drug economy or some other outlawed means of survival. He is arrested, put in prison and put to work. His new wage: 22 cents per hour. From worker, to unemployed, to criminal, to convict labourer, the cycle has come full circle. And the only victor is big business.

For private business, prison labour is like a pot of gold: no strikes, no union organising, no unemployment insurance or workers compensation to pay, no language problem as in a foreign country.

New leviathan prisons are being built with thousands of eerie acres of factories inside the walls. Prisoners do data entry for Chevron, make telephone reservations for TWA, raise hogs, shovel manure, make circuit boards, limousines, waterbeds, and lingerie for Victoria's Secret—all at a fraction of the cost of "free labour".

Prisoners can be forced to work for pennies because they have no rights. Even the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution,

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which abolished slavery, excludes prisoners from its protections.

And more and more, prisons are charging inmates for basic necessities from medical care to toilet paper to use of the law library. Many states are now charging "room and board". Berks County Jail in Pennsylvania is charging inmates \$10 per day to be there. California has similar legislation pending. So, while government cannot (yet) actually require inmates to work at private industry jobs for less than the minimum wage, they are forced to by necessity.

Some prison enterprises are state-run. Inmates working at UNICOR (the federal prison industry corporation) make recycled furniture and work 40 hours a week for about \$40 per month. The Oregon Prison Industries produces a line of "Prison Blues" blue jeans. An ad in their catalogue shows a handsome prison inmate saying: "I say we should make bell-bottoms. They say I've been in here too long." Bizarre, but true. The promotional tags on the clothes themselves actually tout their operation as rehabilitation and job training for prisoners—who, of course, would never be able to find work in the garment industry upon release.

Prison industries are often directly competing with private industry. Small furniture manufacturers around the United States complain that they are being driven out of business by UNICOR which pays 22 cents per hour and has the inside track on government contracts. In another case, US Technologies sold its electronics plant in Austin, Texas, leaving its 150 workers unemployed. Six weeks later, the electronics plant reopened in a nearby prison.

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The proliferation of prisons in the United States is one piece of a puzzle called "the globalisation of capital". Since the end of the Cold War, capitalism has gone on an international business offensive. No longer impeded by an alternative socialist economy or the threat of national liberation movements supported by the

Soviet Union or China, transnational corporations see the world as their oyster. Agencies such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, bolstered by agreements like NAFTA and GATT, are putting more and more power into the hands of transnational corporations by putting the squeeze on national governments.

The primary mechanism of control is debt. For decades, developing countries have depended on foreign loans, resulting in increasing vulnerability to the transnational corporate strategy for the global economy. Access to international credit and aid is given only if governments agree to certain conditions known as "structural adjustment". In a nutshell, structural adjustment requires cuts in social services, privatisation of state-run industry,

repeal of agreements with labour about working conditions and minimum wages, conversion of multi-use farmlands into cash-crop agriculture for export, and the dismantling of trade laws which protect local economies. Under structural adjustment, police and military expenditures are the only government spending that is encouraged. The sovereignty of nations is compromised when, as in the case of Vietnam, trade sanctions are threatened unless the government allows Camel cigarette billboards to litter the countryside or promises to spend millions in

the US-orchestrated crackdown on drugs.

The basic transnational corporate philosophy is this: the world is a single market; natural resources are to be exploited; people are consumers; anything which hinders profit is to be rooted out and destroyed. The results of this philosophy in action are that while economies are growing, so is poverty, so is ecological destruction, so are sweatshops and child labour. Across the globe, wages are plummeting, indigenous people are being forced off their lands, rivers are becoming industrial dumping grounds, and forests are being obliterated. Massive regional starvation and "World Bank riots" are becoming more frequent throughout the Third World.

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All over the world, more and more people are being forced into illegal activity for their own survival as traditional cultures and social structures are destroyed. Inevitably, crime and imprisonment rates are on the rise. And the United States law enforcement establishment is in the forefront, domestically and internationally, in providing state-of-the-art repression.

Within the United States, structural adjustment (sometimes known as "the Contract with America") takes the form of welfare and social service cuts, continued massive military spending and skyrocketing prison spending. Walk through any poor urban neighbourhood: school systems are crumbling; after-school programs, libraries, parks and drug treatment centres are closed. But you will see more police stations and more cops. Often, the only "social service" available to poor young people is prison.

The dismantling of social programs and the growing dominance of the right-wing agenda in US politics have been made possible, at least in part, by the successful repression of the civil rights and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the leaders—Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton and more—were assassinated. Others, like Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt, Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal, have been locked up. Over 150 political leaders from the Black Liberation struggle, the Puerto Rican independence movement and other resistance efforts are still in prison. Many are serving sentences ranging from 40 to 90 years. Oppressed communities have been robbed of radical political leadership which might have led an opposition movement. We are reaping the results.

The number of people in US prisons has more than tripled in the past 17 years from 500,000 in 1980 to 1.8 million in 1997. Today, more than five million people are behind bars, on parole, on probation or under other supervision by the criminal justice system. The state of California now spends more on prisons than on higher education, and over the past decade has built 19 prisons

and only one branch university. Add to this the fact that increasing numbers of women are being locked up. Between 1980 and 1994, the number of women in prison increased fivefold. Women now make up the fastest-growing segment of the prison population. Most of these women are mothers, leaving future generations growing up in foster homes or on the streets. Welcome to the New World Order.

CHALLENGING THE TRANSNATIONALS

Prisons are not reducing crime. They are fracturing already-vulnerable families and communities.

Poor people of colour are being locked up in grossly disproportionate numbers, primarily for non-violent crimes. But Americans are not feeling safer.

As "criminals" become scapegoats for our floundering economy and our deteriorating social structure, even the guise of rehabilitation is quickly disappearing from our penal philosophy. After all, rehabilitate for what? To go back into an economy which has no jobs? To go back into a community which has no hope? As education and other prison programs are cut back or in most cases eliminated

altogether, prisons are becoming vast, overcrowded holding tanks. Or worse: factories behind bars.

Prison labour is undercutting wages—something which hurts all working and poor Americans. It's a situation which can only occur because organised labour is divided and weak and has not kept step with organised capital. While capital has globalised, labour has not. While the transnationals are fashioning our planet into a global village, there is still little communication or cooperation between workers around the world.

Only an internationally linked labour movement can effectively challenge the power of the transnational corporations. There have been some wonderful, shining instances of international worker solidarity. In the early 1980s, 3M workers in South Africa walked out in support of striking 3M workers in New Jersey.

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- Anarchist Black Cross Federation, NJ ABC-BG, PO Box 8532, Patterson, NJ 07508-8532, website <<http://burn.ucsd.edu/~abcf>>.
- *California Prison Focus*, 2940 16th St, Room 100, San Francisco, CA 94103, tel

(415) 252 9211, website <www.prisons.org>.

- Coalition for Prisoners Rights, Box 1911, Santa Fe, NM 87504.
- Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex, Box 339, Berkeley, CA 94701, e-mail <critresist@aol.com>, website <www.igc.org/justice/critical>. A national conference and strategy session, held 25-27 September 1998 at UC Berkeley, California.
- *Libertad*, Newsletter of the Out-of-Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War, 2607 W. Division, Chicago, IL 60622, USA. *Libertad* carries news and information from the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War.
- *Out of Time*, 3543 18th St, Box 30,

More recently, longshore workers in Denmark, Spain, Sweden and several other countries closed down ports around the world in solidarity with striking Liverpool dockers. When Renault closed its plant in Belgium, 100,000 people demonstrated in Brussels, pressuring the French and Belgian governments to condemn the plant closure and compel its reopening.

In the United States there is a glimmer of hope, as the AFL-CIO [the merged American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] has voted-in some new, more progressive leadership. We'll see how that shapes up, and whether the last 50 years of anticommunist, bread-and-butter American unionism is really a thing of the past.

What is certain is that resistance to the transnational corporate agenda is growing around the globe. In 1996, the people of Bougainville, a small Papua New Guinea island, organised a secessionist rebellion, protesting the dislocations and ecological destruction caused by corporate mining on the island. When the government hired mercenaries from South Africa to train local troops in counter-insurgency warfare, the army rebelled, threw out the mercenaries and deposed the Prime Minister.

A one-day general strike shut down Haiti in January 1997. Strikers demanded the suspension of negotiations between the Prime Minister and the International Monetary Fund/World Bank. They protested the austerity measures imposed by the IMF and WB, which would mean the layoff of 7,000 government workers and the privatisation of the electric and telephone companies.

In Nigeria, the Ogoni people conducted a protracted eight-year struggle against Shell Oil. Acid rain and hundreds of oil spills and gas flares were turning the once fertile countryside into a near wasteland. Their peaceful demonstrations, election boycotts and pleas for international solidarity were met with violent government repression and the eventual execution of Ogoni writer/leader Ken Saro Wiwa.

In France, a month-long general strike united millions of workers who protested privatisation, a government worker pay-freeze and cutbacks in social services. Telephone, airline, power, postal, education, health care and metal workers all joined together, bringing business to a standstill. The right-wing Chirac government was forced to make minor concessions before being voted out for a new "socialist" administration.

At the Oak Park Heights Correctional Facility in Minnesota, 150 prisoners went on strike in March 1997, demanding to be paid the minimum wage. Although they lost a litigation battle to attain this right, their strike gained attention and support from several local labour unions.

Just as the prison industrial complex is becoming increasingly central to the growth of the US economy, prisoners are a crucial part of building effective opposition to the transnational corporate agenda. Because of their enforced invisibility, powerlessness and isolation, it's far too common for prisoners to be left out of the equation of international solidarity.

Yet, opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex and supporting the rights and basic humanity

of prisoners may be the only way we can stave off the consolidation of a police state that represses us all, where you or a friend or family member may end up behind bars.

Clearly, the only alternative that will match the power of global capital is an internationalisation of human solidarity—because, truly, we are all in this together.

International solidarity is not an act of charity. It is an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objective. The foremost of these objectives is to aid the development of humanity to the highest level possible.

— Samora Machel (1933-1986)

Leader of FRELIMO and First President of Mozambique

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- *Raze the Walls*, Box 720418, Orlando, FL 32872. Provides prisoner support and abolition work.

- *The Fire Inside*, c/o California Coalition for Women Prisoners, 100

McAllister St, San Francisco, CA 94102, website <<http://www.wigc.org/justice/prisoners/women>>.

- *This Just In*, 103 Bartlett Ave, Pittsfield, MA 01201.

- *Transformation*, c/o Women's Project, 2224 Main St, Little Rock, AR 72206, e-mail <wproject@aol.com>.

A quarterly newsletter for social and economic justice, by groups working with women prisoners since 1989.

- *Walking Steel*, Can't Jail the Spirit, Box 578172, Chicago, IL 60657, e-mail <CEML@aol.com>. *Walking Steel* carries written materials including a collection of blogs on some of the current political prisoners in the USA.

Canada:

- Arm The Spirit, PO Box 6326 Stn A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1P7, website <<http://burn.ucsd.edu>>.

Europe:

- International Prison Watch, Secretariat International, 16 avenue Berthelot BP 7083, 69301 Lydon Cedex 07, France.

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